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# ON PUTTING LITERATURE INTO THE DRAMA

BY BRANDER MATTHEWS

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In the early eighties of the last century the Authors Club was founded in New York. At its gatherings men of letters came together for informal converse,—poets and playwrights, novelists and essayists, historians and philosophers. In their several degrees they were all makers of books, but they regarded literature each from his own special angle; and the unexpected result of this interchange of view was a broadening of the outlook of those whose vision had been too narrowly focussed on their own field of endeavor.

At one of these reunions I chanced to be the third of a group of which the other two were Bronson Howard and Richard Henry Stoddard. At a pause in our conversation, Stoddard turned to Howard and asked a rather condescending question.

"Howard," he asked, "why don't you sometimes put a little literature into your pieces?"

The playwright was not at all disconcerted.

"That is an easy question to answer," he replied. "I never *put* literature into my plays because I respect my art too much."

I doubt if Stoddard perceived the significance of the slight emphasis that Howard had given to the word *put*. He made no rejoinder; and our talk drifted to other topics.

Stoddard's inquiry revealed an attitude not uncommon among men of letters who take little interest in the theater and who are accustomed to consider the drama from the literary point of view. They think of a play as something intended only to be read and to be judged solely in the study and not also on the stage. What Stoddard sought in a play was "literary merit," so-called, that is to say, style, rhetoric, verbal brilliancy; and he gave little heed to the more necessary merits of invention and construction. In

his eyes fine writing made a fine play; and it was because most of the poets of our language took this view persistently in the nineteenth century, that the English drama was then so sterile. Their attitude was not unfairly represented in the characteristic remark of Bayes in *The Rehearsal* when he inquired what a plot was for—"except to bring in good things." And by good things they meant glittering similes, pointed antitheses and an unending effulgence of figures of speech. They would have had little sympathy with Joubert's incisive declaration that "what is wanted is not merely the poetry of images but the poetry of ideas." They expected the dramatist to construct his decoration and they were dissatisfied if he only decorated his construction.

The quarrel is ancient, if it is not honorable; and the men of letters could have pointed with pride to Seneca and to the Italians of the Renaissance and to the French who followed in the footsteps of the Italians. But they would have found no support in the practice or in the precepts of the great Greek dramatists or of the great dramatists of the modern languages. The great dramatists know better than any one else that plays do not live by style alone, but by substance, by invention and by construction, by imagination and by veracity. A good play must be well written, no doubt, but before it is written it must be well conceived and well developed; it must have a theme; it must have a story which reveals itself in a sequence of situations; and this plot must be peopled with human beings who look like human beings, who talk like human beings, and who act like human beings.

While the words by means of which these characters disclose themselves and carry on the action are important, they are far less important than the action itself. Moreover, true "literary merit" does not reside in the smoothness of the external rhetoric but in the vigorous harmony of the internal elements which enable the play to stand four-square to all the winds that blow. It is by the force of these internal elements that a drama maintains itself in the theater, even if it is more or less by its external charm of style that it pleases us also in the library. In the playhouse the play appeals to the playgoers, an incongruous mass made up of all sorts and conditions of men; and the verdict of this mass is always sincere and it has always had

the high respect of the great dramatists, who have indeed paid little or no regard to any other verdict. Probably most of the great dramatists would unhesitatingly subscribe to the assertion of one of the most adroit playwrights of our own time, Mr. William Gillette, when he declared that dramatic authors find the public "honest and straightforward with us always, ever ready to be moved by what is true and lifelike and human, provided it be made interesting; ever ready to reject the false and artificial, even though it be festooned with literary gems."

"Festooned with literary gems"! Could there be an apter description of the "literature" that is *put* into a play, in the vain hope of disguising its falsity and its artificiality and of concealing its lack of truth and humanity? A dramatist who understands his art and respects it, never tries to "put" literature into his plays; he confines his effort to putting life into them, well aware that if he achieves sincerity and veracity, he will also attain literature without having strained for it.

The overmastering desire to be "literary" on all occasions and at all costs has wrecked the hopes of many an ambitious man of letters when he has sought success on the stage. Stevenson, for example, believed that the artificiality of his *Deacon Brodie*, its falsity to life, could be atoned for by its sheer verbal beauty. He was able to give his story this external merit; but he neglected to give it the necessary internal merit of sincerity. He amused himself by playing with his subject, instead of wrestling with it after fasting and prayer. He tried to palm off on the public a verbal veneer as a substitute for the solid mahogany which the public expected. Clever as he was, he failed to see that a living drama depends upon a stark simplicity of structure, which may admit of decoration but which does not demand this because it has ever the undeniable beauty of perfect design, a beauty equally undeniable even when it is unadorned.

Voltaire was a man of letters, beyond all question, but he was also a man with a wide and varied experience in the theater; and it was this experience which once led him to set forth the essential qualities of a play:

Compact a lofty and interesting event in the space of two or three hours; bring forward the several characters only when they each

ought to appear; never leave the stage empty; develop a plot as probable as it is attractive; say nothing unnecessary; instruct the mind and more the heart; be eloquent always and with the eloquence proper to every character represented; use a language as pure as the most careful prose without permitting the fetters of rhyme to interfere with the thought,—these are the conditions now imposed on tragedy.

And if we strike out the injunction never to leave the stage empty and the advice about rhyme—monitions of value only in French tragedy—we have here a characteristically penetrating analysis.

Man of letters as Voltaire was above all else, he did not ask the intending playwright to spend any of his energy on the effort to be "literary." Even when he prescribed the duty of being "eloquent always," he qualified this and explained his real meaning by adding, "with the eloquence proper to every character represented." Plainly enough Voltaire was out of sympathy with the many poets of his own time who were wont to rely on festoons of literary gems and whose verbal glitter was often only paste. With the same insight into the true conditions of dramatic composition, Voltaire, on another occasion, declared that tragedy welcomes metaphor and abhors simile. "Why? Because a metaphor, when it is natural, belongs to passion; but a simile belongs only to the intelligence."

When we consider the plays of Shakespeare in the order in which he wrote them, it is interesting to see how he indulged freely in simile in the days of his apprenticeship to the art of playmaking; and how, as he gained a firmer grasp on the principles of the art, he banished simile and relied almost altogether upon metaphor. In *Love's Labor's Lost*, for example, which is probably his earliest attempt at comedy, we can observe him joyfully displaying his own verbal dexterity, delighting in conceits and in fanciful comparisons, juggling with words for their own sake. Something of this he retained even when he wrote his youthful tragedy *Romeo and Juliet*, where we can catch him in the act, so to speak, of "putting literature into a play." But there is nothing of this in the *Macbeth* of his maturity; that achieves literature inevitably, by its simple veracity, and seemingly without over-exertion on his part. In *Love's Labor's Lost* we can detect his own consciousness of his cleverness, whereas in *Macbeth* he has ceased to be clever and is content to be true.

In nothing is Shakespeare's ultimate mastery of his craft more clearly disclosed than in the unerring certainty with which he employed prose or blank verse as the varying episodes of his story seemed to demand the one or the other. In *Julius Caesar*, for instance, Brutus and Cassius and Mark Antony, the loftier figures of the tragedy, speak in blank verse; the less important characters make use of a rhythmic prose, effectively cadenced but lacking the rigorous restrictions of meter; the plebeians and the mob express their emotions and their opinions in bare prose.

Most of the modern poets of our language when they have essayed the five-act tragedy have failed to profit by Shakespeare's example. They have not dared to drop into prose, even in dealing with the unpoetic commonplaces of everyday existence. They never cease to walk on stilts, because they are forever trying to put literature into their plays. "The ordinary English poetical play varies between rather slack and formless meter, and ornate, involved and ultra-poetical diction," so Professor Gilbert Murray asserts; and he goes on:

The first enables the poet to slide into prose when asking for his boots; the second, almost unassisted, has to keep up the poetic quality of the atmosphere. It does so, of course, at the expense of directness, and often with the ruinous result that where you have Drama you have killed Poetry, and where you have Poetry you have killed Drama.

Professor Murray has here placed his finger on the prevailing defect of the English poetical play of the middle of the nineteenth century. It insisted on being "poetical" at all times and at any cost. It was the result of a mistaken belief that a play could be made poetical by applying a varnish of "poetry." And a belief equally mistaken led the writers of English comedy of the same period to besprinkle their dialogue with hand-made witticisms, with alleged epigrams, distributed lavishly to all the characters, even to the dullest and the least capable of making a joke. In the insubstantial comic pieces of H. J. Byron, anybody would say anything, however inappropriate, to anybody else, if this could be made a cue for a cut and dried repartee. The spectators of these highly unreal pieces could not doubt that Byron kept a notebook in which he jotted down every joke, every quip and every pun that came to him;

and they could almost see him taking out one or another of these merry jests to pin it into his dialogue as best he could.

"The sure sign of a general decline of an art is the frequent occurrence, not of deformity, but of misplaced beauty," said Macaulay with his customary common sense. "In general, tragedy is corrupted by eloquence and comedy by wit." Perhaps it is rather grandiloquence than actual eloquence which marks the decline of tragedy; but that comedy is debased by a perpetual questing of epigram, falsely so-called, must be admitted at once. The disappearance of the factitious and laborious "wit" from our more recent plays is evidence that modern comedy is recovering its health.

Oscar Wilde was the latest English comic dramatist to indulge in incessant fireworks. But it is an error to suppose that his success on the stage was due to his scintillations and his corruscations. His best comedies are solidly built, with an ingenious story carefully elaborated into a compelling plot. The pleasure which we get from *Lady Windimere's Fan* is only in small part derived from its rattle of witticisms, often highly arbitrary in themselves and sometimes very arbitrarily distributed. Indeed, there are already signs that the persistent and insistent crackle of the dialogue is beginning to be annoying to latter-day audiences. We are losing our liking for an external dazzle which distracts our attention from the internal action artfully arranged to arouse and to retain our interest.

Even if *Lady Windimere's Fan* is not quite sincere in its portrayal of character and not quite veracious in its dealing with life, it has an ingeniously articulated action which would retain its potency even if the play should be translated into German and thence into Spanish and finally back into English,—an operation which would certainly brush off all the spangles that now glisten in the dialogue. Yet we may be assured that these forced and fortuitous quips and quirks were not injected continuously because the author believed it to be his duty to put literature into his play, but rather because he recognized that he had to maintain his own reputation as a wit, as a manufacturer of cleverness, as a retailer of "good things." And it may be admitted that in bestowing this deliberate brilliance on his dialogue, Wilde was dutifully following in the footsteps of

the two masters of the English comedy of manners, Congreve and Sheridan.

In the third quarter of the nineteenth century the French drama also suffered from an epidemic of epigram. The foremost French comedy of that time, the *Gendre de M. Poirier* of Augier and Sandeau, was more or less infected by this malady; and the chief rival of the *Gendre de M. Poirier*, the *Demi-Monde* of the younger Dumas, has been quarantined by later French critics because of its feverish eruption of witticisms. It is only fair to record that Dumas recovered and that in his later *Françillon* there is scarcely a single example of calculated repartee. The dialogue of *Françillon* seems spontaneous even when it is at its cleverest, whereas that of the *Demi-Monde* strikes us to-day as mannered and metallic. The French dramatists of the twentieth century may even be accused of having reacted a little too violently from the practices of their immediate predecessors, since they appear almost to avoid wit.

So long as the dramatist, French, British or American, was adjusting his plays to the apron-stage which brought the actors almost into personal contact with the audience and which was a platform inviting the characters to be exuberantly grandiloquent in tragedy or confidentially witty in comedy, he was subject to a constant temptation to "put literature into the drama." But this temptation has diminished, if it has not disappeared, now that our playwrights are all working for the picture-frame stage which keeps the actors far distant from the spectators and which therefore places a premium on simple and direct utterance.

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